

**SANTA MONICA MOUNTAINS CONSERVANCY**

RAMIREZ CANYON PARK  
5750 RAMIREZ CANYON ROAD  
MALIBU, CALIFORNIA 90265  
PHONE (310) 589-3200  
FAX (310) 589-3207



April 30, 2007

Rudy Silvas  
Impact Analysis Section  
Los Angeles County Department of Regional Planning  
320 West Temple Street  
Los Angeles, California 90012

**Comments on Notice of Preparation for Vesting Tentative Tract Nos. 060257  
and 062000 Adjacent to Val Verde, Santa Clara River Watershed**

Dear Mr. Silvas:

The two subject tract map areas occupy 155 acres of habitat that contains much high quality habitat in the regional habitat linkage between the Santa Susana and Sierra Madre Mountain ranges. Wildlife that either occupies the site, or is moving through it, can move freely southeastward to Castaic Creek, northward to Halsey Creek, and west to the core habitat of the Los Padres National Forest around Lake Piru. For all intents and purposes it is natural land that contributes substantially to a much larger ecosystem and provides both direct benefit to the residents of Val Verde and Halsey Canyon and to the balance of the Santa Clara River watershed. The two proposed tracts would entirely eliminate all 155 acres of those benefits. In addition it would result in permanent, annual fuel modification impacts to approximately 15 acres located offsite. The two proposed development clusters would be totally impermeable to wildlife movement.

The DEIR must explain why the applicant's large property that abuts the southerly of the two subject tracts has so far not been considered part of the subject project under the California Environmental Quality Act. It is quite safe to say that that portion of the ownership is projected for future development. When such development is contemplated, and would have a direct and substantial bearing on the cumulative adverse impacts of the two subject tracts, it appears that project piecemealing is occurring.

The need for housing needs to be balanced with open space protection both on the subject property and within the habitat areas that surround the subject tracts. Open space with a new neighborhood provides an important amenity to the residents and surrounding neighborhoods. The proposed project creates a seamless, gap-free small lot subdivision throughout the site, including within the steeper variable terrain along the northern

property boundary. The end result would be unavoidable significant adverse impacts to wildlife movement and loss of habitat. Pending further rare plant and animal surveys, the list of additional significant impacts has a high probability of growing. Biological surveys conducted in the historically dry 2006-07 wet season must be repeated in 2007-2008 to give decision makers an adequate picture of what resources the property contains.

To avoid and substantially reduce these significant biological impacts, the Draft Environmental Impact Report must include a range of alternatives that would permanently protect between 50 and 60 percent of the project area. Some of that area would have fuel modification on it.

The ultimate open space lots on both tracts must be a contiguous block of habitat from the northwest corner of the tract to the southeast corner of the second tract. Clearly there is a 250-foot-wide ownership gap between the two tracts that supports equivalent habitat and does not have road access. That gap is not an excuse to provide an otherwise contiguous onsite habitat linkage.

Where possible the minimum width of the corridor must not be less than 300-feet-wide such that a contiguous strip of habitat is outside of the 200-foot-wide required fuel modification zone. If the tracts are going to have a Community Facilities District (CFD) all of the open space should be dedicated to a public agency in fee. The homeowners associations need to retain an easement to do the required brush clearance, and the CFD needs to fund that clearance with explicit dedicated funding for the life of the project.

If no CFD is going to be involved with one or both tracts, then any land within 200 feet of the residential lot boundaries should be retained by the homeowners association. A public open space agency and the County must also have highly restrictive conservation easements over all portions of those homeowners association lots or portions of larger private lots if that is the case. That land beyond 200 feet should go to a public open space agency in fee simple no later than concurrently with tract map recordation. The CFD should also fund open space maintenance in an amount, or ratio, of no less than \$5,000 annually for every 50 acres of fee simple public land.

### **Reduced Project Footprint - East/West Habitat Linkage Alternative**

The Conservancy requests that the following habitat linkage project alternative be included in the Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR). This alternative would include a permanent open space area along the northern and eastern project boundaries. The width

NOP Comments -Tract Nos. 060257 and 062000

April 30, 2007

Page 3

of the habitat linkage on western project boundary would be 1100 feet. Moving east to the midpoint of the length of the northern property boundary, the width would be 650 feet. That line would continue east until it hits Del Valle Road. Along the eastern boundary of Tract No. 060257 the minimum corridor width would be 300 feet. All portions of the triangular shaped extension in the southeast corner of the tract would also be in the protected corridor.

On the Tract No. 062000 all portions of the property located more than 700 feet from the southern property line would be in the permanent protected corridor. In addition the entire eastern property edge, that is not located within this protected area, would be part of a minimum 75-foot-wide conservation easement.

The County conditions would also include permanent deed restrictions that overlap the easements and fee simple parkland lots.

### **Additional Comments**

The Conservancy's recommended DEIR alternative includes over 130 lots from the applicant's NOP project in Tract 060257 and 15 lots in Tract 062000. The applicant should have adequate flexibility within this grading envelope to mix and match product type and result in an economically feasible project. There are no overriding considerations of public benefit to allow a grading footprint that exceeds that recommended in the Conservancy's alternative project. If housing is needed, within the proposed Conservancy footprint, the applicant can build over 145 houses on the exact lot configurations in the NOP project.

If the applicant states that only the proposed project will support the necessary project infrastructure, then that complete economic analysis must be transparent and fully available to decision makers and the public. The County is under no obligation to approve a project with unavoidable, significant adverse biological impacts because somebody paid too much for a piece of property. The Conservancy's recommended *Reduced Project Footprint - East/West Habitat Linkage Alternative*, or some closely equivalent project, provides a strong economic return on the subject property.

Please direct any questions and all future correspondence to Paul Edelman of our staff at the above address and by phone at (310) 589-3200, ext. 128.

Sincerely,

ELIZABETH A. CHEADLE  
Chairperson